

From Riot Grrrl to Radical

Reflecons from a Working-Class Feminist

GINA WHITFIELD

L'auteure, une féministe militante impliquée dans la non-violence, une féministe de la classe ouvrière, réfléchit sur ses opinions qui ont évolué, plus particulièrement au sujet du rôle des hommes dans la révolution du mouvement des femmes.

I have considered myself a feminist for more than half my life, since I was thirteen. It's only my definition of feminism—and my related perceptions of capitalism, men, and violence—that has continued to change.

As a young suburban working-class girl “punk,” my feminist politic was mostly derived from popular cultural sources, as a member of the Riot Grrrl and *Sassy* generation. My early feminism was informed by these sources, so at an early age my understanding of the basic feminist demands was, in no particular order: the right to choose, the right to rock, and the right to know the seasonal fashions for feminists to look hot.

Of course, today, as a woman in her 20s, whose feminist activism is as a volunteer member of a small collective of women who run a rape crisis centre and transition house, my naïve theory has changed dramatically and matured. As I reflect back on my teenage years, I am conscious that I was unable at the time to accept the most radical segment of that scene, which featured a pervasive anti-rape and anti-violence against women message that was consistent throughout the music and the zines. In this piece I will reflect on my own struggles as an activist, an anti-violence advocate, and a working-class feminist, specifically examining my own evolving views regarding men's role in our revolution.

A (Thankfully) Non-Traditional Household Division of Labour

I grew up in a progressive working class family, with a non-traditional division of labour. My parents both worked and cared equally for their children. My father worked the graveyard shift for most of my childhood in

order to be home during the day to care for my brother and me. He would labour at night and perform “the second shift” during the day, doing all the work of the housewife: childcare, cooking, cleaning and attending all our school field trips, plays and coaching our sports teams. And, when my mother came home from work, it was my father who had dinner ready on the table while he was preparing to go to his paid work. I experienced a childhood in which my parents struggled to live their lives as equals, to the extent that capitalism and patriarchy would allow them.

Like working-class feminist Carolyn Steedman, I did not learn patriarchy from the rule of my father, who never chose violence or to exercise the power that our society allows men to wield over women. I grew up knowing that my parents laboured physically and that there was another system in play that controlled the lives of working-class men and women, and that there was another “man” in control, and that neither of my parents had autonomy over their labour. Steedman argues, and I agree, a distinction needs to be made between “learning of this system from a father's display of its social basis, and learning of it from a relatively unimportant and powerless man, who cannot present the case for patriarchy embodied in his own person” (Steedman 79). My relationship with my father never gave me a reason to question my love for men; I have always viewed working-class men, in particular, as my natural allies.

I am not arguing, of course, that, because I had a father that did not exercise his societal privilege, I did not live under patriarchy. Rather, because I had a mother who demanded a non-traditional matrimonial relationship, I was able, at an early age, to clearly see the benefits of feminism. I understood the equality of gender roles in my household was atypical. For instance, I was regularly questioned by friends, and their parents, about why my parents had different last names and why my father was a “Mr. Mom.”

Contradictions in the University Space

When I entered university, I was the first in my entire extended family to do so; seven years and two degrees later, I still hold that dubious distinction. Thus, as a young woman entering this privileged middle and upper class space of the academy, I sought out spaces that I believed were radical and truly fighting against inequality, and so the spaces of feminist theory and women's studies seemed to be a natural fit.

However, as a working-class woman, my experiences

male social activists and see the benefits of working as a feminist within mixed groups.

Front-line Worker

Today, I am a feminist anti-violence organizer, a volunteer member of a feminist collective that runs a rape crisis line and a transition house for battered women. Of course, there is rarely a need to separate the two, as this work continuously overlaps. On a daily basis, women tell the horrific stories of being brutally raped and battered

As a community activist I had become more interested in the anti-war movement, labour issues, gravitating towards working with women's groups that upheld the need for human rights, not women's rights. This activity also allowed me to build alliances and see the benefits of working as a feminist within mixed groups.

in these feminist spaces were never uncomplicated. I was continually confronted with theories and other feminists who did not take into consideration the complexities that women like myself—women who could claim not only gender, but also class as a location of oppression—faced when entering the academy (Collins; hooks). Thus, since I never saw other working-class women as professors, and only rarely saw them sitting beside me as fellow students, I found these spaces isolating and exclusionary. This forced me to question my alliance with women who I saw not only being classist in their theoretical preferences, but ignoring the hierarchy among women in their own continual “race to innocence” (Razack 14). This theory, elaborated by Razack, is useful in showing how even women can cite patriarchy to downplay the race or class privilege that they personally hold.

They were unable or unwilling to interrogate the fact that, although they are members of a group that is oppressed based on gender, they did have the power to oppress other women in order to maintain their class and race privileges. For instance, it was not uncommon for them to free themselves from the labour of childrearing by hiring a live-in domestic worker or by avoiding housework by hiring another woman, a woman like myself, to do that labour. It was these contradictions that forced me to question my notion of sisterhood and where my alliances should be placed. I started to prioritize organizing against capitalism, and the liberal ideology that justified it.

Although I never thought of myself as letting go of my feminist identity, as a community activist I had become more interested in the anti-war movement, labour issues, gravitating towards working with women's groups that upheld the need for human rights, not women's rights. This activity also allowed me to build alliances with progressive

by attackers they love, just met, or, less often, who were strangers to them. I still find the degree of violence that women face on an everyday level shocking and it has forced me to reconsider and radicalize my own feminist politics. When I was a women's studies student, the need for radical feminist politics never really spoke to me, as I favoured a socialist feminist theoretical approach. Retrospectively, I know that I leaned towards these theories because I have lived a life relatively free from physical violence, although, like all women, I live under the threat of it on a daily basis in addition to a daily dose of sexism.

It's taken me awhile, but working as an anti-violence worker has allowed me to clearly see what makes patriarchy so lethal: we love our oppressors. Unfortunately, they know it is our weakness. When I made the decision to become an anti-violence organizer, I did not realize how it would not only enrich my feminist politics, and how it would affect my own life as a woman who loves a man, even if he is progressive and on most days I consider him one of my strongest political allies. Fighting for women who have been brutally beaten by their lovers, yet who still want to protect their abuser, is a difficult experience. It makes it harder to try and maintain a relationship with a man, even with a progressive man because even he benefits from her beating. I am unable to individualize the violence that occurs to women. It is too common, and men benefit too much from society's tendency to see violence against women as an individual problem, not an attack on all women's freedom.

I enjoyed the idealism of believing in progressive men. Unfortunately, I have found that this fantasy is really difficult to maintain when you work in a transition house. Working in an intense, women-only environment has allowed me to deepen my understanding of feminist theory. It has also clarified for me many of the shortcom-

ings of mixed gender organizing, and given me a critical perspective on the pseudo-feminism that too often permeates activism.

The Boys Club Lives On, Even on the Left

A couple of months ago I was at a gathering of influential political activists and progressives and I recognized two young children alone with their father. A feeling of despair and disappointment rushed over me because these were children I had known because their mother and themselves had lived in the house I worked in. I now had a face to the abuser that she had been attacked by over their decade-long marriage. As I stared at him with a look of genuine disappointment, and his children looked at me with excitement, immediately remembering me, he pretended to be puzzled by my glare. I, of course, could not say how I knew his children. I was forced to immediately leave the gathering because I could not bear the contradiction: prominent progressive, wife-beater.

Examples of progressives being blind to issues of women's liberation are often more subtle than giving a free pass to an abusive man. Too often, tokenism has taken the place of feminist practice. On organizing committees dealing with war and homelessness, I have witnessed a complete lack of sensitivity to the unique ways that these scourges impact on women. When this shortcoming has been pointed out, the solution has too often been to simply select women for a speakers' list or executive committee, rather than to infuse women with specifically feminist politics into the organizations' events. I have felt that getting a feminist agenda included in these venues is like pulling teeth.

Often, then, it seems like activists equate women and feminism. Even worse, sometimes anything that is stereotypically associated with women is considered evidence of "outreach" to the Second Sex. Two woeful examples occurred during the 2005 provincial election in B.C. First, the "Rock the Vote" youth participation campaign believed they would encourage more women to vote if they made their website a pretty pink colour and held a fashion show to register new voters. Not to be outdone, the "Get Your Vote On" campaign sold pink underwear with the slogan "check my box" (Whitfield 2005).

The colourful examples aside, there remains an all too pervasive "old boys club" feel to much progressive organizing. Long-winded men seem oblivious to their own sexism through the obnoxious monopolization of time, space, and positions of power and influence in social justice organizing. This often leaves me disappointed with the amount of feminist organizing that still needs to be done, including the need to educate and call our progressive men on their own patriarchal behaviours.

Conclusion

The relationship between feminism and men will always

be contentious. From a childhood with atypical parental gender roles, to the often alienating space of the academy, to the all too tenuous alliances with male social justice activists, my perspective on the negotiation of this relationship between women's liberation and men has remained fluid. While women have made advances towards equality in many spheres, rates of violence in the home and in relationships remain almost unchanged. This contradiction will not disappear until patriarchy is defeated.

Gina Whitfield is a Vancouver based feminist, anti-violence organizer, writer, and photographer. She is the Executive Director of the Coalition of Progressive Electors, the progressive civic party in Vancouver. She is also a collective member at Vancouver Rape Relief and Women's Shelter.

References

- Collin, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought*. New York: Routledge, 2000.
- hooks, bell. *Where We Stand: Class Matters*. New York: Routledge, 2000
- Razack, Sherene. *Looking White People in the Eye*. Toronto: University of Toronto, 2001
- Steedman, Carolyn. *Landscape for a Good Woman*. London: Virago Press, 1986.
- Whitfield, Gina. "Nice Ass, Wanna Vote." *Seven Oaks Magazine*, February 2005: http://www.sevenoaksmag.com/commentary/50_comm2.html
- Whitfield, Gina. *This Ain't My Language: Standard English and the Devaluation of Working Class Language in the Academy*. Unpublished Masters Thesis. Toronto: University of Toronto, 2004.

A. MARY MURPHY

death by liver
Ginsberg's viscera
slips him past the margins
ignore that sudden sag you feel
there on the cosmic left
your howler is not silenced
commune with the dead
read the oracle's entrails
only hair and toenails fall away

A. Mary Murphy's poetry appears earlier in this volume.